

You Were Only Waiting (for This Moment to Be Free)

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Summary:

He places one hand on Billy's knee, the other gently forcing his jaw upwards so that Billy will look into his eyes, and he asks again, "What happened?"

Billy blinks in slow motion, and Steve is thinking of a million different awful things that Billy can fill this one, two, three seconds of silence with.

Nothing he comes up with is quite so awful as what eventually does.

Or, Steve and Billy attend a funeral.

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Author's Note:

Please read the other stories first or this one will not make sense. :)

Home stretch y'all. One more story after this one. Thanks for joining me on the ride <3

You Were Only Waiting (for This Moment to Be Free)

Things start... tentatively.

This isn't surprising to Steve, considering how difficult it was for them to even get this far, so he thinks he can be patient as they navigate uncharted territory. They aren't telling anyone they're *together* yet, especially not Katie or Hannah (mainly because if they told them, there'd be no reason to tell anyone else because word would absolutely get out). Billy is as slow as molasses to take steps forward, but he *is* moving. It's in the form of casual, intimate touches on the back of the neck, or a thumb rubbing circles on the top of Steve's hand during a movie. He's started spending the weekends at Steve's, letting the girls play while he and Steve sneak away for a little uh... *private time* .

Steve enjoys the sex, absolutely, but the part he likes the most is the waking up later, with Billy tucked in close and warm. Steve just likes to look at him sleeping sometimes, those sinfully long eyelashes draped across the tops of his cheekbones, his curls mussed, his beautiful mouth parted slightly. He looks at peace in Steve's bed, the troubled wrinkle between his eyebrows disappearing. Steve knows he's still struggling, but it's easy when it's like this. Just the two of them. He only wishes they could have more time.

...but time isn't something single fathers tend to have. There are playdates and jobs and dinner to make. And it's fine (and it actually *is* fine, not just fine in the way Steve always says it is).

It's fine until a Tuesday on the cusp of summer vacation when Billy hasn't come to get Katie by eight. He's never been this late. He calls Billy's house and gets no answer, so he calls Hop.

...and Billy left at lunch and never came back.

"Fuck," Steve whispers into the receiver. The girls are asleep on the sofa, the television rolling through the final scene of *Dirty Dancing* .

Hop goes hunting for him, and Steve doesn't hear anything for about an hour.

An agonizing, inhumane hour.

Steve puts the girls to bed in Hannah's room, tucks them in. They don't seem to think anything of it since they've had a few more sleepovers recently (as has Steve), but he's damn near ready to start tearing his hair out. It's an anxiety that's on a completely different level than the one he has over the monsters, because this fear is so much more present and palpable. Something has *happened* .

The knock on the door brings a brief flood of relief, but it's squashed when he answers it and finds Hop on the doorstep with a clearly inebriated Billy in tow. He's got a split lip and the beginnings of a black eye.

"Found him in the parking lot of the local dive," Hopper says. He's holding onto the back of Billy's shirt like a mother dog would the scruff of a puppy's neck.

"My car wouldn't start," Billy slurs, annoyed. His eyes are red-rimmed. Steve wonders if he's been doing more than drinking.

"I'm sure the car did that kind of damage to you too," Hopper says.

"It did," Billy explains, or at least seems to think he explains.

"It alright if I leave him with you?" Hopper asks Steve. "I'd really rather not lock up my employee in the drunk tank."

"I'll take care of him," Steve says.

“No,” says Billy.

They both look at him. Billy’s looking at the threshold of the doorway, swaying slightly.

“I can’t go in there,” he says. “I can’t see her.”

“Who? Katie?” Steve asks. He puts his hands on Billy’s arms. It looks like he’s just trying to keep him steady, but it’s honestly a godsend to be able to touch him. He’s real. He’s here. He’s not dead.

Billy’s legs wobble like they’re going to give out. His expression is carefully blank.

“Katie’s asleep,” Steve offers. “It’s just you and me, bud.”

He glances at Hopper. Hopper’s staring at the two of them, expression unreadable. Steve’s heart leaps momentarily into his throat, but Hop ultimately doesn’t comment. He just shrugs a shoulder and says, “Call me in the morning. Let me know how he is.”

Steve nods and offers a small, thankful goodnight before hauling Billy inside and onto the sofa. He doesn’t fight Steve on it, just sits. Steve chooses to sit across from him on the edge of the coffee table instead. His worry has diminished, but replacing it is anger. Steve never has liked being left in the dark, metaphorically or literally, and he’s suddenly pissed off that Billy’s gone and self-destructed again and left Katie as Steve’s sole responsibility, not that Steve minds taking care of her, but without even a call--

He stops himself before he gets too riled up.

Steve’s known Billy long enough now to know that it’s never as simple as self-destructing for the sake of it.

So he asks, “What the hell, Billy?”

It’s softer and less agitated than intended, but that’s probably for the best since Billy still flinches away from it like Steve has yelled anyway.

Billy still doesn’t meet his gaze. He reeks like a liquor store, his

mouth parted, his hair mussed, his eyelashes nearly draping the tops of his cheekbones.

“Car wouldn’t start. Went to pop the hood on it. Hit myself in the face.”

Steve blinks. Sighs. “You were gonna drive like this?”

“No. Was just gonna get in the car. Use the air conditioning and shit. Listen to music. Sleep.”

It takes a long time for Steve to tamp down on the anger that bubbles right back up. It’s neither wanted nor helpful right now. He can be angry tomorrow, he thinks, when Billy has a hangover.

“Why didn’t you call me?” Steve asks, and fuck, his tone is harsher anyway. It seems like he always fucks up when he’s trying.

Billy doesn’t flinch at the harsh tone like he did at the gentle one though. He just sits there, and Steve is immediately, acutely aware that this tone is one Billy’s more accustomed to.

“I couldn’t come back here. I couldn’t see her.”

“Has she not seen you drunk before?”

“No.”

“It’s not that big of a--”

“That’s not why I can’t see her.”

Steve falls silent for a moment. The air feels heavy and charged around them, like it does right before a thunderstorm. Steve feels ticky and nervous. Billy is still robotically stone-faced.

“Why can’t you see Katie?” Steve asks carefully, hands wringing between his knees.

“I can’t tell her what happened. She won’t forgive me.”

“What happened, Billy?”

Billy says nothing.

Steve doesn't wait.

He places one hand on Billy's knee, the other gently forcing his jaw upwards so that Billy will look into his eyes, and he asks again, "What happened?"

Billy blinks in slow motion, and Steve is thinking of a million different awful things that Billy can fill this one, two, three seconds of silence with.

Nothing he comes up with is quite so awful as what eventually does.

"Beth died."

If it was a storm, this would be when the torrential downpour would start. It's not a storm though, so the air just keeps sitting quietly as Steve drowns in the information.

Beth died.

Katie's mother, Beth.

Katie's mother, Beth, *died* .

Billy's eyes go back to the floor. He doesn't say anything else.

So, Steve does. "Jesus Christ... When?"

"Last night."

"How did you find out?"

"Max called me at lunch and told me."

Steve exhales slowly. Breathing is difficult. He has a lot of questions he wants to know the answers to but doesn't want to ask. Billy just keeps staring blankly at the floor.

He asks anyway because the silence soon stretches on for too long to bear anything else.

“...How?”

“How do you think?”

Steve thinks Billy intends for it to come out cruel, but he doesn’t quite manage it.

He reaches out, slides his hand through Billy’s hair. Billy barely reacts.

“When is the funeral?”

Billy shrugs a shoulder. “Probably soon.”

“Would Max know?”

“She can probably find out.”

“Are you okay?”

Billy finally looks up and says, “Peachy.” Steve doesn’t like the way his own heart stutters at the glazed over and (pardon his phrasing) *dead* look in his eyes.

Steve’s hand settles on Billy’s knee, and he tries with, “Are you sure?”

Billy doesn’t answer him.

--

In the morning, Steve calls Hopper and tells him the situation, then lets Billy sleep off as much of the hangover he surely has as possible. The girls get dressed (both in Hannah’s clothes) and taken off to school, and Steve doesn’t tell Katie that something is wrong but she looks at him like she can tell there is. As she gets out of Steve’s backseat, little Doc Martens splashing purposefully in the puddle on the sidewalk, she looks back at him and stares.

Her eyes are so blue, her chin tilted up, and she looks like she wants to say something. Katie doesn’t tend to keep anything to herself after all... but Hannah takes her hand, and they walk into the school together, and no words pass between them.

Billy's awake when Steve gets back, slumped at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee. He looks hellish, the bruises on his face darkening overnight. When he lifts his gaze at the sound of Steve's presence, his expression is the same as the night before. The only difference is that his eyes are slightly clearer.

Numb is the only way Steve can think to describe it.

Steve thinks he should say something. He knows he should.

Billy speaks first.

"I called Max," he says. "She told me when the funeral is. I don't, I..." His eyes fall back to his coffee. It's not steaming. It also hasn't been drunk. Billy's been sitting with it for a while.

Steve knows.

"I've got some extra cash," Steve says. "I can get you both to California."

Billy swallows. He looks briefly close to feeling *something*, but it fades as quickly as it appears.

"Okay," he says. Then, "thank you... Steve."

Steve slides a hand over Billy's shoulders, pulls his head close in an illusion of an embrace. Billy doesn't return it, but he also doesn't fight it off, and right now Steve figures that's as good as it's going to get.

"Are you okay?" Steve asks again.

"Fine," says Billy.

Steve thinks he understands why Colleen always hated that word.

--

There's a lot of phone calls to make. A flight to book, a hotel to stay in, a rental car. He tells Hopper they're going to be gone for a few days and Hopper offers some of his own money to help pay the way

which is appreciated but not needed. Steve just asks him to come by the house and make sure it's still intact for when they return. Then it's a call to the school to let them know Katie and Hannah will be out. No one even questions that it's Steve making the call for Katie too.

Billy... sleeps. Or at least pretends to. Steve hasn't seen him all morning.

They're flying out tonight. It's the first flight Steve finds, and he books it without even looking at the price. At noon he goes to get the girls and check them out of school. Billy has to come with him because even if everyone trusts Steve with Katie, Billy still has to sign for her.

Billy looks physically ill as he signs, not even acknowledging the stink eye the secretary gives him for the bruises. He looks about ready to collapse when Katie and Hannah appear, walking hand in hand down the hallway with their teacher alongside them. Hannah appears confused, but Katie's expression is hardened. It's familiar, Steve thinks. It reminds him of how she'd looked just before she'd exploded into a tantrum that night she threw the plate. She's on the cusp of *something*.

"What happened to your face?" is the first thing Katie says.

"I hit it with the hood of the Camaro," Billy says.

Hannah starts to laugh but stops when Katie doesn't join her.

Katie looks at Steve, then back at Billy, and she asks, "What happened?"

"We'll talk about it at home, Katie," Billy says. He sounds exhausted.

"No. Now," she demands.

"No. When we get home."

"Why won't you tell me?!"

She's shaking. Billy doesn't answer.

He's shaking too.

"Tell me!" It's not a demand. She is *begging* . "Dad! Please!"

"When we get home, Katie," he says quietly.

" *Dad* !" Her voice cracks. Hannah squeezes her hand.

"Let's go home," Billy says and walks out. As soon as he's outside, he's lighting up a cigarette. Steve has no idea where he got them; he must have bought them the night before. Steve stares out at him through the glass doors of the elementary school. He can feel the teacher's piteous gaze as it travels from Billy, to Katie, to Steve. Steve kind of wants to turn around and shout at her that he's not the one who she should feel fucking sorry for, but he doesn't. He just takes Hannah's hand and leads the two girls in a chain out the doors into the cloudy afternoon.

Billy chain smokes the whole drive back. No one says anything about how Billy referred to Steve's house as 'home'.

--

As horrible as the silence in the car was, Steve realizes it's nothing compared to the silence he hears while Billy is upstairs with Katie, breaking the news to her.

Hannah sits next to him on the sofa, Chunk pressed to her chest. The television is off, and they're doing nothing but sitting very still. Hannah looks at Steve's hands, which are squeezing his knees, then at his face. Steve looks back at her. She appears to be trying very hard not to break the silence, even though he hasn't told her to be quiet.

He reaches out and touches her hair. Her little lip wobbles, and her eyes well up with tears. "Something bad happened," she says as softly as possible, as if she can keep the silence from being disturbed if she's just secretive enough about it.

"Yeah," Steve says gently. "Something did."

"What was it?"

Steve tucks her under his arm, against his ribcage. “Katie’s mom... She uh... she’s not gonna be around anymore.”

“Katie says she’s sick,” Hannah says. “That’s why Billy won’t let her see her.”

“She... she was sick, yeah... I d... I don’t know if, I mean, I...”

How the fuck is he supposed to tell her this?

He sure doesn’t envy the monumental task set before Billy. He briefly thinks he should maybe be up there with him, that they should be telling both of the girls together but... Beth isn’t Hannah’s mother.

Steve is not Katie’s father.

“Katie’s mom, she... she’s gone,” Steve manages, and God, that’s so *vague*, what the fuck does that even mean--

“Katie’s never gonna see her again?”

“We’re... we’re all gonna go to California so that she can say goodbye.”

Big, fat tears start rolling down her face. She understands. Steve wishes she didn’t. “I gotta go see her!” she cries out, clambering down off the sofa and bolting to the stairs. Steve chases after her.

“Hannah, just wait, you’ll see her in a m--”

She makes it to the top of the stairs first but doesn’t make it to Steve’s bedroom where Billy and Katie have been talking. She doesn’t have to. The door flies open, and Steve just manages to hear Katie scream, “I *hate* you!” and then Katie’s wrapped around Hannah like a lifeline. Steve doesn’t think he’s ever heard such devastated sounds from a child before. Katie *howls* against Hannah, drowning out Hannah’s hiccuping sobs, and Steve stands there at the top of the stairs. Helpless.

Billy comes out of the bedroom. His expression still hasn’t changed. His gaze is far away. Katie doesn’t even look up when he walks by the two girls. Steve takes his arm gently, but Billy shrugs it off.

He finishes off a pack of cigarettes on Steve's back porch, underneath the heaving gray clouds of a storm that just won't start.

--

Katie cries herself to sleep and stays that way for most of the drive to the airport. Even when she wakes up, she doesn't say a word. It's just as well. Billy's clearly not in the talking mood either, considering he hasn't said anything since her declaration. He is stone-faced, like a soldier faced with a war he can't win. Steve desperately wants to reach out and touch, but he doesn't think it'll be appreciated. He's not entirely certain it would even be acknowledged.

They get their bags checked, get boarded. Hannah has let some of the sadness leave her because it's her first time on an airplane and she's excited, especially because she and Katie get to sit together on the row in front of their dads all by themselves. Katie feeds off of her energy and perks up a little, but the desolate look doesn't leave her eyes.

"You ever flown before?" Steve asks Billy as he settles into the seat next to him.

"Nope," says Billy, staring out the window.

"Nervous?"

"Not looking forward to being off my cigarettes for four hours."

Steve presses his lips together and doesn't say *you managed for a couple of months more or less*. He doesn't want to say the wrong thing and nothing feels like the right thing. There's also the alarming desire to push, to get *something* out of Billy besides this cold, numbing air, but Steve squashes it down.

"Try and get some sleep," Steve says instead of anything else. He doesn't say *you'll feel better*. He knows he won't. He just hopes he will.

Billy makes a non-committal sound. Steve stares at his hand on their shared armrest. He knows Billy's not comfortable with displaying their affection in public. Steve's fingers itch where they sit on his leg.

No one would notice. Probably.

He doesn't go through with it.

Eventually, he sleeps. He doesn't know if Billy does. Billy looks so fucking tired as it is, but it's the kind of tired that sleep can't fix.

Nothing can fix this.

They get checked into their hotel. The girls sleep in one bed, Billy and Steve in the other. Billy spends most of his night outside the hotel lobby, smoking. Steve sleeps through most of it, but he knows that's what's happened because he stirs at about four a.m. when the bed dips and Billy's presence comes near and smells strongly of smoke.

Steve could comfort, he thinks. They're not alone in the room, but it's dark and quiet. He could reach out and touch, offer what he can.

He feels the slightest brush of fingertips against his jaw, hears Billy's breath *hitch* --

Steve opens his eyes. It's morning. Billy's gone again. The girls are up, watching cartoons on the television.

Damn it.

He sits up, looking around for signs that Billy is at least close by. He's sort of pissed off, even though he doesn't want to be. Katie looks like she's been crying again, and Steve thinks Billy should really *be here* and not expect Steve to handle this. He's not equipped to deal with this shit. The beginnings of panic start seeping in again, the same panic he'd had when he didn't know where Billy was back before the rest of the world imploded and not just Steve's world.

The door opens and Steve can breathe again. Billy reeks of cigarettes, but his disappearance doesn't appear to have been completely fruitless. He's returned with what appears to be a suit. It's a cheap thing, Steve can tell, but at least it's not as hideous as the one Billy was wearing to his job interviews.

"You guys want to hit up the continental breakfast?" Billy asks the

girls.

“Okay!” says Hannah.

Katie says nothing. She won’t even look at him.

“Right. Okay.” Billy says, and nothing about it seems right or okay. “Breakfast, then baths, then we’ll get you guys dressed.”

“O... kay...” Hannah says a little less surely than before. She glances at Katie who is very pointedly looking at the television. Even when Billy steps in front of it, it’s as if she’s determined to look right through him.

“You gotta talk to me at some point, kid,” Billy says softly. Steve sees it for what it is-- an attempt to reach out, to offer comfort.

Katie, unfortunately, doesn’t see it that way. She gets off the bed and goes into the bathroom and slams the door.

Billy doesn’t react except to go and sit at the squashed table in the corner by the window.

Steve knows he should probably stay and at least be a referee for this impending storm, but... “Come on, Hannah,” he says. “I’ll take you down to breakfast.”

He wouldn’t call himself a coward, but he sure feels like one.

--

Steve gets the girls bathed, gets them dressed. It’s all Hannah’s clothes because they never went back to Billy’s place, but Katie fits into Hannah’s light blue dress just fine. The color is beautiful on her, but her blue eyes still look gray. Hannah is in pink, and she’s let Steve do her hair like always, but her attention is divided. She can’t seem to keep it on anything but Katie and attempting to cheer her up somehow. It doesn’t work, but Katie forces little smiles to show that she appreciates the effort.

She looks so much like Billy.

“Do you want me to do your hair too, Katie?” Steve asks, holding up the hairbrush in offering.

“Daddy’s the best at it,” Hannah tells her, grinning.

Katie chews on her bottom lip, then climbs up onto the bed Steve is sitting on and sits in front of him. He starts combing through her long, wavy locks. “What would you like for me to do?” Steve asks.

“I dunno,” Katie mumbles.

“Do you want it up? Or down?”

“I want to go home...”

He swallows, keeps brushing, even as she says, “I don’t wanna be here. I don’t wanna do this. It’s not fair.”

Steve glances at the bathroom door. The shower is still running. Billy’s been in there for a while.

He says, “You’re right.”

She turns to look at him. “What?”

“I said, you’re right. It’s not fair. It sucks.”

“It fucking sucks,” she says.

“Yeah. It does.”

Tears dribble down her cheeks. She doesn’t appear to really notice them. “I don’t like it.”

“I don’t like it either,” Steve says. “No one likes it... but... it’s what happened... and it’s not your fault, Katie.”

She crumples, and a moment later she’s buried her face into his chest. He just holds her, rocking her back and forth for a few minutes until the sobbing settles. Hannah crawls up onto the bed and tucks herself in with the two of them, and they all just huddle together until the air starts to soothe and Steve feels like he can breathe around the

knot in his throat again.

He knows he shouldn't be the one doing this. Why is he doing it?

"Thanks, Dad," Katie mumbles.

That's why , he thinks.

--

They're in the rental car outside of the funeral home when Billy turns around in the driver's seat and looks at Katie. She looks back at him for the first time, but she still doesn't say anything. Billy silently reaches in his pocket and digs out a lipstick bullet and hands it to her. "I bought it at the drugstore. I thought... you might wanna wear it."

When she pulls the top off, underneath the color is fire-engine red. Her lips part slightly, and then she looks up at him and asks, voice small, "Will you put it on me, Dad?"

He does.

Steve has found as he's gotten older that he likes crowds less and less. This goes double for crowds of people he doesn't know, so he gravitates towards Max and Lucas, both dressed in black.

"Hey, Steve," Lucas says. He seems surprised to see him.

Max is decidedly less surprised. "Thanks for coming," she says. She's looking over Steve's shoulder at Billy with the girls.

Steve shrugs. "I mean, I... I guess I..."

"I know," Max says.

"Max... What are you doin' here?" Steve asks.

"I kept tabs on Beth after Billy left town. Her being Katie's mom and all... I mean... I'm her aunt. Sort of... and you know how Billy is. He's not real good at the emotion stuff, so... I did it for Katie."

“You’re a good kid, Max.”

A corner of her mouth turns up, and she claps Steve on the shoulder. “I’m not a kid anymore, Steve.” She makes her way across the parking lot to Billy, and Steve watches them share a few hushed words, watches her give him a brief hug that he doesn’t react to.

Lucas looks at Steve like he can clue him in on something he’s missed, but Steve just shrugs again and follows after her. There’s some small talk that feels meaningless and ultimately is meaningless. Still, it’s nice to fill up the space with something besides what’s going on around them for a moment. Lucas complains about his job, and Max tells the girls about the beach, and somehow that ends up with her promising to show them how to do some cool skateboard tricks later. Steve hears the latest about Mike and Will and Dustin and El, or at least what Lucas knows. Some are better at keeping in touch than others. Steve in return tells him about his latest phone call from Nancy and how things are going for them.

Billy stays quiet, smokes a cigarette, as far from the crowd as possible, like he doesn’t want to be seen. Katie stands beside him, holding his hand.

They talk about the weather.

They talk about Hawkins.

They talk about anything except what happened.

...until that’s all that’s left.

Everyone starts filing into the funeral home. Steve meanders around outside until Billy and Katie finally catch up, and they all go inside. There’s a table set up with a guestbook and a photo of Beth, and it occurs to Steve that all he’s ever had to go on is his imagination. She’s not really how he pictured, but he can see traces of Katie here and there. Her hair is blonde. Her eyes are brown. The picture is clearly old, a high school photo, maybe. The photo album underneath on the table shows that it’s probably the last photo of her where she didn’t look rail thin and gray. There’s a couple of shots from when she was pregnant where she looked healthier, but they’re fleeting. In

just about every photo, she's wearing lipstick. Fire-engine red.

Steve lifts his gaze from the album to find Billy standing next to him, staring at the portrait.

"You okay?" Steve asks.

Billy doesn't answer. He goes into the chapel and takes a seat in the back. It's a closed casket.

God, Steve doesn't want to do this. It fucking *sucks* , and it's not *fair* . He wants to go home.

Hannah takes his hand. "It'll be okay," she says. "I got you, an' you got me, and they've got us. Right?"

Steve's eyes sting, but he smiles anyway. "Yeah."

--

The service is relatively short. There aren't a lot of people here, leaving empty rows between their pew and the others. Steve can pick out Beth's family immediately. Her parents. Her sister. Her brother. There are a few friends, Steve guesses, maybe acquaintances from high school. One or two of them look like junkies themselves.

The sermon is performed by a preacher who talks about God and the blessings he provides, talks about flowers that bloom for but a single spring, talks about how grief and suffering are part of God's love and God's plan, and it's such bullshit. Steve leans in close to Billy and whispers, "Isn't he going to talk about *her* ?"

Billy cracks what almost qualifies as a smile for the first time in what feels like a lifetime. "She wasn't what one would call a uh... god fearing type. Not like her folks. She would've fuckin' hated this."

There's... *something* . Billy's numbness sets back in, but it's not as potent as before, not as easily put on.

Katie leans against Billy and mumbles, "This is stupid... I wanna see her."

“I know, kid... I’m sorry. I couldn’t make that call.”

A couple of hymns are sung, and then it’s time to go to the grave site. It feels too fast and too slow, and Steve forgets how to move. Everyone in Steve’s pew seems just as content to sit as Beth’s relatives and friends make their way out, which gives Steve a moment to catch Beth’s family looking at Billy like he murdered her. He stares right back at them, defiant, and Steve hopes that that’s all that comes of it, but considering luck has never really been on his side, he’s not sure why he expected it to start now.

Her brother is waiting for him in the parking lot after the burial.

“You have a lot of nerve to show up here,” says Beth’s brother.

Billy puts his hands in his pockets and just stares at him, waiting.

“This is *your fault* !” her brother spits.

“Don’t go there, Ethan,” Billy says softly. “You’ll regret it.”

“What are you gonna do? Hit me?” Ethan sounds like he wants Billy to hit him, if for no other reason to give him an excuse.

“No.”

“Beth is dead because of *you* ,” he says, shoving a finger in his face. “You took her daughter from her and ran off to some hick town to be a fucking *faggot* .” He looks at Steve then, like he knows everything they’ve ever done together.

Billy’s tongue clicks on the inside of his mouth. Steve recognizes this as the moment that the Billy he first met in high school would start swinging. His eyes have that dark, primal quality to them. Steve thinks he really needs to step in, but...

“Man,” Billy says softly, “I brought Katie here to say goodbye. That’s all. Don’t push it.”

“I’ll push all I fucking *want* ,” Ethan says, and shoves Billy. Steve kind of wants Billy to hit him, just to see what would happen, but he’s pretty sure getting into a knockdown dragout fist fight in a graveyard

parking lot is pretty high on the list of Things That Should Not Happen.

“I didn’t put the needle in her arm, Ethan. I didn’t ever touch the stuff, even if you don’t believe that. What happened to Beth is shitty, but I did what I had to do to protect our daughter. She was fucked up before I came along, and she was fucked up after.”

“She was getting *better* !”

“I lived with her, Ethan. No. She wasn’t.”

“Fuck you!”

“Stop cursing in front of my kid.”

“She shouldn’t even be with you. Who the fuck thought *you* would be a good parent?”

“The State of California did.”

Billy lifts his hand, and Steve thinks *here it comes* , but Billy doesn’t punch. He just places his hand on Ethan’s shoulder and squeezes it a little too hard. He leans in close so that Katie and Hannah can’t hear, but Steve absolutely still catches it.

“You’d best keep your parenting opinions to yourself, amigo. Your dear old pops put his hand down Beth’s pants when she was ten, so you don’t really have the authority on telling me what’s right. Get the fuck to the back to the gravesite and say your goodbyes because rest assured, you’re never going to see me or Katie again after this.”

He lets his hand drop and takes a step back. “Oh, and by the way,” he says, “She wanted ‘Blackbird’ by the Beatles sung at her funeral. You would’ve known that if you knew her at all.”

Ethan looks shaken. He struggles for words. “They’re gonna take her away from you when they find out the way you live.”

Billy looks at Steve, then at Ethan, then back at Steve. “Yeah, well,” he says, “I’d like to see them try. I work for the police.”

There's not much else Ethan can say. Steve thinks *we should go now. Like, right now*. He even puts his hand on Billy's shoulder to kind of urge him to the rental car.

Then, Billy says, "I'm sorry."

Ethan stares. So does Steve. So does everyone.

Billy walks away. Steve manages to catch up just as Billy takes a seat on the hood of the rental car and lights up a cigarette. He hands it to Steve when he sits next to him. Steve doesn't choke on it like he did in the car on Parents' Day.

"Is that true? What you said to him?" Steve asks.

"It's what she told me," Billy says.

"Why did you... apologize?"

Billy blinks slowly. "I just... I realized... he's not pissed at me. He's just sad. Trying to find someone to take it out on..."

Steve realizes this is something Billy recognized in him because it's something he's suffered through himself. Because it's something Katie has suffered through too.

"Yeah, well... being sad is still no excuse to be a dick."

"Not everything he said was wrong. Somebody might try... y'know... take her away from me because of how I am. Because I..."

He looks at Steve. There's a crack in the numbness, a fissure running all the way through.

"I won't let that happen," Steve says.

...Simultaneously with Billy saying, "I love you."

Steve drops the cigarette.

Billy hops off the car and goes to the middle of the parking lot where the girls are standing with Max and Lucas. Steve follows, feeling like

a light breeze could knock him down. “Hey,” Max says to them both, “I was just talking to them about the ocean. I thought... maybe me and Lucas could take them to see it? We can go buy them swimsuits and stuff, it’s fine. I just thought maybe it’d be better...”

She doesn’t say it, but Steve hears it anyway. *I thought you guys could use some time alone.*

“Can we go? Please?” asks Hannah, wide-eyed with hope.

Max looks at Billy, and Steve can tell Billy gets it too. He doesn’t know what’s gone on between them that has caused the shift in dynamic, but he’s grateful. He’s so *grateful* ...

Steve smiles. He feels something like anxiety, but positive. *Giddiness*, he guesses. Which is not really a feeling he feels comfortable having adjacent to a graveyard, but since when did anything in Steve’s life make fucking sense? “Of course. We can come by later and pick them up, and we’ll all go to dinner. My treat.”

Steve doesn’t miss the fact that Billy throws an arm around Max and gives her an awkward hug before they head off, but he decides it’s probably best he doesn’t mention it.

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Steve and Billy go back to the hotel in silence. They go up the elevator in silence. They go down the hall and into the room in silence.

Steve feels the air is lifting, that the heaviness of the task at hand is over and that means it’s going to be easier now. It leaves him exhausted, and he’s sure Billy’s tired too, so as he walks into the room he says, “I think a shower would be a good fucking idea, followed by some room service--”

He’s immediately aware that Billy has not followed him further into the room.

He turns and finds Billy with his back against the door, and Steve realizes the air hasn’t lifted because the storm has left.

It's just finally started to rain.

Billy's hands are over his face, like a child might cry, his shoulders shaking as everything settles in. He thinks maybe Billy only just then realized that Katie wasn't there, which meant he didn't have to be strong anymore, and Steve watches as Billy slides to the floor and buries his face in his knees. He cries almost silently, like he doesn't want anyone to hear him, and Steve's heart breaks.

He goes to him, tugs his arm until he looks up, then pulls him to his feet. Billy stumbles a few steps, and then they collapse onto the bed together and Steve just holds him. "It's okay," Steve says.

"It's not," Billy whimpers. "Fuck..."

They just lay there for a while, and Billy doesn't speak, though all of his worries and fears are loud enough to hear anyway. *What if I could have done something to save her? What if it really is my fault? What if they take her away from me? How am I going to do this by myself?*

"It's okay," Steve says again, hand sliding up and down Billy's back. "I've got you, and you've got me, and they've got us. It's gonna be okay. You're not alone."

He kisses the top of Billy's head. He wants to ask him about the love confession, if he meant it, what prompted him to say it... but the timing is wrong... and the answers are ultimately moot points. Billy doesn't say shit like that if he doesn't mean it, not when there's so much at stake. Maybe he just couldn't hold it in anymore, needed someone to know that he cared after hours and hours of numbness.

It's in that moment Steve realizes he doesn't really care about the who, what, when, where, or why.

He just loves Billy.

That's enough.

Author's Note:

i'm on [tumblr](#)